

**AN EMBARRASSMENT OF SUFFERING:
ON MAKING LIFE A HANGOVER WITHOUT THE BUZZ**

I have long been fascinated by ascetics who live near a mountain top, meditate for hours in a drafty cave, sleep on a bed of nails, and allow themselves to be buried alive. I've read that the Buddhist monks who chant their prayers in Himalayan caves have learned to raise their core body temperature to 112° F to fight off hypothermia though a fever has never made me more comfortable when the air conditioning is set too high. I have no desire to duplicate such feats, but I still find them interesting in the abstract. I observe the fakir and the hermit the way I watch rugby: I enjoy watching the game but really have no interest in joining the scrum.

Interested as I am in ascetic athleticism, I took the introductory course in Transcendental Meditation in 1973 to get a taste of what I was reading about. While TM eventually provides its practitioners with a personal and secret mantra, other gurus I was reading suggested the koan or quizzical paradox as a meditative focal point. By concentrating on this "point," adepts could rid themselves of desire and the attendant stress that unfulfilled longing creates. The tip of one's nose, a mandala, the navel, or a lotus blossom is a popular substitute if a koan is not available. Before I had acquired my personal mantra, therefore, I tried to solve the ancient puzzle of one hand clapping beyond the obvious answer, silence. Seated in the recommended lotus position, I thought long and hard about the conundrum with no success; the answer simply would not come by repeatedly asking the question. And even though I was supposed to remain still, I decided to move one hand as rapidly as I could and listen intently to its "applause." It's vaguely like checking the answer in the math book's appendix and working backward to determine the method the author used to get that result. Some would call this cheating; I call it research. I discovered that if I moved my flailing hand close to my ear, I could hear a faint "woosh" or "woom." I had it then: the answer to the 3000-year-old puzzle is "woom!" As my excitement faded, I tried to settle into a meditative void, and though nothingness was my goal, my brain was restless from having discovered something where for so long there had been nothing. What would the sound of one hand clapping be, I wondered, if the hand were moving at the speed of sound? A sonic boom! The koan's answer depends on the speed of the moving hand. I believe that for a second or more I rose above the rubber mat I had been sitting crosslegged on. And the TM people said it would be many weeks and dollars ere I levitated! I could barely contain myself, but I settled back into my trance and pondered further. How relative was this answer? What would the sound be if I moved my hand at the speed of light? An atomic explosion! Silence, woom, boom, bang! I'm not sure what the decibel level of my "big bang" would be, but certainly higher than a Twisted Sister concert on the tarmac at JFK. All I can say with certainty (thanks to Albert Einstein) is that the explosion would produce the energy equivalent to the mass of my right arm multiplied by the speed of light squared. Of course, I would be vaporized in the process and much of South Carolina's Piedmont along with me, but nothingness after all was my goal, not the stigmata.

Ascetics and mystics often make much of the fact that the universe was created out of nothing. For this reason among others, nothingness has become a kind of womb they long to return to. (Is "woom" an echo of "womb"?) The Koran states that Allah could have left

the universe a vacuum, but He didn't; the evidence is all around us. Paul Valery concurs, but he argues that "despite the artistry of creation, the nothingness still shows through." Whether we came from nothing or will return to nothing is beyond my ken though not my imagination; I worry more about what we should do with ourselves between these theoretical voids. Should one "master the art of doing nothing," as many ascetics have argued, or, "achieve the void and be made whole," as the Tao states? I answer both questions with the Brooklyn Bridge. It would not, of course, have been built by ascetics, and I for one love that bridge, both its practicality and its aesthetic uselessness. As for its utility, in the 1950s, our family lived in Brooklyn, and I could walk or bike freely across the bridge's wooden walkway to Manhattan as motorized vehicles whizzed by below. The bridge was and remains a practical solution benefiting thousands who work in Manhattan but cannot afford to live there or pay the ferryman twice a day. As for aesthetics, John Roebling, the bridge's designer, included two graceful Gothic arches at either end that could just as easily have been rectangular openings to lighten the structure. But this solution would not have been nearly as satisfying to this aging medievalist who thinks Chartres Cathedral is one of the finest structures on the planet.

An old story, possibly apocryphal, involves an American tourist in Palermo, Sicily who heard some voices coming from an ancient sanctuary while he and his wife were exploring the town. Curious, the retired theology professor asked his wife if she'd like to accompany him, and when she declined, he ducked inside alone. When his eyes had adjusted to the dim light, he saw a shimmering crystal carved in the shape of a zero ringed by sputtering candles on the altar. Overhead was a satin banner with the Latin *Nihil*, "nothing," embroidered in gold filigree. The traveler's knowledge of the local dialect was limited, but with his dictionary, he soon understood that the small chorus of monks, the only others in the church, was intoning praise to "The Blessed Cipher." Walking out into the light of day, his waiting wife asked him what he'd seen. Said he, "My dear, is nothing sacred?"

Indeed nothingness may be holy to some, but thirty minutes of silence is not music, nor is a blank canvas or an empty page art, nor is any of these deserving of worship in my opinion. The white spaces and the musical silences are indeed functional, but if I blow continuously into a flute with no modulation, that monotone or noise depending on how long it lasts is no more music than utter silence. If I cover this page with print so dense there is no white space left, have I communicated anything? Have I touched a cold heart? Is it art? Not to me. For starters, there has to be a mix of white and black, sound and silence for there to be meaning or art. And just as a hectic life is relieved by peace and quiet, so is boredom relieved by a concerned human voice, music, or the bustle of small children.

Skeptical as I am of the value of nothingness, I have been nevertheless drawn to the ascetic ideal like the time in the 1970s when I dreamed of joining that secular monastic order called the Peace Corps. The problem was I had a family to support. Doubtless the complexities of that responsibility led to a longing for a simpler life, for the contact I have had with my gurus whether face to face or on the printed page has generally been rewarding. Learning to focus on my breathing and to empty my head of stray or obsessive thoughts, for example, taught me to relax; indeed, it put me to sleep. But the gurus all agree that a nap is not what the ascetic is seeking. Frankly, I'm grateful for any nap even one of five minutes duration because the renewal of energy is immediately felt. Though the ascetic may scorn bed rest, there's no question that midday sleep works for the domes-

ticated feline. But for all its independence, the cat is no ascetic. After its nap, the cat likes nothing better than to go out honkytonking. Indeed cats remind me of Gandhi's observation that it requires a lot of money to support people like him living in poverty

Meditation doesn't always put me to sleep, but it helps. After urinating at three in the morning, all my body wants to do is go back to sleep, but my brain often wants to review some road-rage incident like a cracked CD. Though it's not foolproof, what helps me is a single-minded concentration on my nasal hairs. Yes, I focus as intently as I can with eyes shut in my most comfortable supine position, not too hot, not too cold, and "see" the hairs of my nostrils being blown out and then being sucked back in like a wheat field in a shifting wind. Blown out, sucked in; blown out, sucked in until I can put the road rage out of my conscious mind long enough to fall asleep.

As a tenured academic, I spend about forty hours a week on the eighth floor of Strode Tower in my "tree-house" office ninety feet up overlooking Lake Hartwell and the Clemson Forest. Up there in the clouds some might argue that I have achieved the ascetic ideal of withdrawal. But I'm not a pillar saint, and I'm not ready to share my Buck knife just yet. Okay, you can peel your orange with it, but I want it back clean and sharp, and I want it known that it is mine. You'll notice my initials engraved on its handle. And I don't want anyone to use it without asking me first. I know that I can't take it with me, so I've told my oldest grandson, Edgar, that he may have it when I am no more. The last thing I want is for "Buck" to rust back to earth with my mortal remains. I may have issues with the material world, but I try not to be fanatical or ascetic in that regard.

Nor am I ready to beg for my supper like some mendicant monk any more than I'm willing to share ownership of the half-acre lot which is all the land I can lay claim to on earth. I'm too proud and fussy a capitalist to "dive" dumpsters for food, and Lord knows that at 6' 4" and 215 pounds I could not survive long on what Sister Wendy Beckett and many like her live on: a cup of coffee for breakfast, a few crackers and two potato chips for lunch, and a glass of milk for supper. I for one feel a patriotic obligation to keep American agri-business solvent. Imagine the farmers who'd lose their jobs if we learned to survive on even 1000 calories a day. I like to think of the 3000 calories that I selflessly consume each day as fuel for the engine of our economy because every time I try to lose weight, the Dow plummets.

Nevertheless, as a poet and essayist who plucks hair from his ears while musing the void, I am a quasi-hermit. It comes with the territory the way despair haunts the salesperson. I've learned that my muse is a shy sort, who emerges only when there is peace and solitude. Sometimes I'll receive a glimmer from her in a crowd or a classroom, but for anything sustained, I need to withdraw to the "knee-worn floors" of my basement "cave" or my office "tree house." Apparently she likes to go for long slow bike rides and walks, for she often speaks most clearly on those monkish perambulations. In the last decade or so, I have tried to tease her out when I am driving. When I feel myself succumbing to road rage, I begin chanting "*ohm*" in traffic to help when I'm on Atlanta's I-285, for example, and there is an eighteen wheeler in front of me, another behind, one on either side, and we're all going so fast in the rain I don't dare take my eyes off the road to check our speed. Indeed, at tense moments like this, it's probably best not to know how flagrantly I am breaking the law. If the cops were to stop me, it would be a welcome respite on the shoulder, but how can they ticket me if I am nothing to them?

I used to chew my tongue as I approached one of several four-way stops on campus

where I do the majority of my driving, but if I can remember to chant “I’m a Zen driver” as I approach these busy and confusing intersections, I can usually pass through unscathed. A big part of my success has to do with yielding; ascetics have historically submitted without a fight though many have been civilly disobedient. If there is any question about which car among the four of us goes next, I will motion for some other driver to go first. He waves, I smile, and we all drive on seraphically. True, I’ve lost five seconds from my lunch hour by yielding when I could have charged forward, but my life expectancy has increased by ten seconds. Now if I could just work on reducing that spike of blood pressure when a line jumper appears. I have no qualms about telling the offender, “Excuse me, but the line forms in the rear!” but I cannot do it *and* remain calm like the Zen cops I admire. These paragons, I’ve read, may fall asleep while undergoing a root canal or being hauled off to jail. I suspect they are closet narcoleptics, but that may be just a sour-grape fantasy.

In the early 90s, a group of musicians called the Kodo drummers came through Greenville, SC where quite by chance my wife and I happened to hear a performance. This small but dedicated Zen Buddhist sect lives on a tiny island off the coast of Japan, rises with the sun, dresses in natural fibers, runs twenty-four miles every day, returns for a meal of kelp, and then spends the rest of the day drumming on the beach. On stage, their hard brown bodies produce what might be described as rhythmic, hypnotic meditations using drums and an occasional flute, but it’s very loud, minimal, and a steady diet of it must be trying. However, they do give something back to an audience in their recordings and public performances unlike so many ascetics who disappear into the desert to polish their souls to perfection and are never seen again. As most musicians go, the Zen drummers are relatively tight-fisted: just a month of each year is spent touring and performing for the unenlightened. Compare that to the rock drummer Ringo Starr, the jazz drummer Joe Morello, the big band drummer Gene Krupa and the decades of music they eagerly and profitably gave their audiences.

The average contemporary Christian ascetic, on the other hand, is seldom so athletic or musically talented as these Japanese drummers. Instead, he or she is often one who reads the New Testament and decides the best way to honor Jesus’ sacrifice is to re-enact Good Friday forever—one bad day out of thirty-three years. As often as I have read the gospels, I have yet to find the verses which have led so many to “crucify” themselves repeatedly like Kafka’s “hunger artist,” a man so fixated on the spirit that he abandoned his humanity. How any ascetic, Christian or otherwise, decides that life should be a repudiation of all pleasure is an enigma, but there are many who have done it thinking pleasure is a sin that must one day be atoned for. What follows is a short list of extremists, immoderate ascetics of many faiths. The Jains will eat no honey because, they reason, bees have spent a lifetime laboring to make it. Fakir Agastiya, a Hindu ascetic, held his arm over head until a bird built its nest on it. St. Simeon, one of the pillar saints, discovered that a maggot on his leg had fallen away from the wound. Said Simeon obligingly to the parasite as he replaced it, “Take, eat what God has given you!” Catherine of Sienna drank the pus from the breast-cancer sores of a woman she was nursing. Nuns at the Roman Catholic convent at Lisieux are reported to have eaten lepers’ scabs and drunken tubercular sputum as evidence of their faith. St. Thomas More wore a hairshirt for years beneath his robes which left the skin an open wound of festering sores and crawling lice. Maritza Tamao, a French yoga enthusiast, survived fifty-four hours nailed to a cross, fifteen of them with

the cross upright. Hindu sadhus often tie stones weighing up to eighteen pounds to their penises to help control lust. And Jagdish Chandler, another Hindu holy man, crawled 870 miles to honor the goddess Mata. Thus the list ends in utter exhaustion.

I am reminded by all this “wheel spinning” that when Buddha met a man who’d spent twenty-five years learning to walk on water, the master said, “But the ferry only costs a penny.” If Buddha had met the dehorned sadhus lugging their stones in the unconventional manner described above, he might have said, “With all due respect, sirs, but a cold shower in the rain is free and much less taxing.”

Of course asceticism’s critics have railed against the extremists since the start. In India where institutionalized self-denial probably began, the Hindu *Gitas*, in fact, condemn the “terrible austerities” of the yogis. In the last century, Freud agreed charging that such austerity didn’t promote “the development of energetic independent men of action.... It develops well-behaved weaklings who are subsequently lost in the great multitude.” Oscar Wilde, another sharp critic, graphically described extreme penance as the “shining sore on the leprous body of Christianity.” Similarly, the Catholic travel writer and critic Barbara Grizutti Harrison calls self-mortification a “reproach to joy.” And the American novelist John Barth claims that “it is often pleasant to stone a martyr.” By “martyr,” I assume that Barth is referring to those who deny themselves as an end in itself. Martyrdom as a means to a greater good such as Dietrich Bonhöffer’s is another matter altogether.

My own critical questions focus on the facile assumption that repudiating nature will somehow impress nature’s creator. Asking such questions has led to the formulation of what I immodestly call Eisiminger’s Law: the more ascetic an organization is (though not an individual like Gandhi), the less its influence on society will be. Alas, the celibate Shakers are down to their last couple of members in 2006, yet the Amish and Mennonites who permit marriage are holding their own. The Quakers, however, the least ascetic of these four sects and the most socially involved, continue to exert a disproportionately positive influence in the treatment of prisoners (Amnesty International was founded by Quakers), insuring the rights of women and children, lobbying for gun control and the cause of peace worldwide. The reverse of the law is also true: the more self-indulgent a group is (think of the myriad and short-lived hippie communes of the 1960s), the quicker its demise will be.

Perhaps the last word on asceticism is found in the churches of the world where golden reliquaries containing the bones of those who so scrupulously avoided wealth while alive are now studded with jewels in perpetuity. If at the resurrection the Christian saints return to claim their bodies, they are going to have a difficult time getting to their feet with all that gold on their backs, but then the church has always preferred us on our knees.

As I said at the outset, I have no desire to test the thesis that “less is more” on the conubial couch. As my wife and I approach our fortieth-fifth year of married life together, I know that sex after a week’s abstinence is better than sex after a day’s leave, and sex after two weeks is better still but not by much. I’ve yet to try a three-week hiatus. Generally two weeks of self-denial means that I’ve overlooked an opportunity sometime in the last fortnight. Ascetics, on the other hand, seem to be of the opinion that no sex will make their salvation an explosive orgasm. Personally, I’ll take the breast in the hand over that murky bush any day.